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Getting an Education in Cuba



By Sarah Asp Olson

Ruth Dawley-Carr takes lessons learned from multiple trips to Cuba and applies them in her Minnesota State Mankato classroom.

All told, over the last two decades, J. Ruth Dawley-Carr has spent more than a full year in Cuba. It was an undergraduate study abroad trip to Ecuador that initially piqued her interest.

“My host brother was writing his thesis about the Cuban revolution,” says Dawley-Carr, an assistant professor of education studies. “That entire year I lived with him and his family, I learned about important historical and political figures in Cuba, I learned about the revolution, I learned about imperialism. It developed this curiosity in me: What else is going on that I just didn’t learn about in any of my education?”

Her first trip to the country was in 1999 as a graduate student. In the subsequent years she’s interviewed citizens across the age spectrum and has come to understand and respect a nation that’s been largely closed off to average American citizens.

Dawley-Carr’s latest research project, conducted over 10 days in early 2016, is a follow-up to her 2015 doctoral dissertation and focuses on the changing landscape of Cuba and the impact that’s having on citizens.

“What is new about the research is in large part what has changed between Cuba and the U.S.,” she says. “Now we’re looking at a third type of relationship [and] my research is continuing to look at this larger question: What does it mean to be a citizen? And then from there, how do people express citizenship?”

For Cubans, she’s found, one of the most important parts of citizenship is taking care of each other.

“Folks in Cuba will say, ‘If you see someone on the road [in trouble], you stop,’” she says. “In Cuba, the perception is they take care of one another, they take that social responsibility [seriously].”

That social responsibility is something, as a second-year faculty member, that she is weaving into the way she educates students at Minnesota State Mankato. She asks her pre-service teachers to work together on teams, sharing talents and abilities, and truly supporting each other as they work through lessons. In doing so, she hopes they’ll develop a sense of camaraderie and collectivity that will serve them well in their careers as teachers.

“That connection, that collective power, I think is very much linked to a mindset from Cuba,” she says.



Ruth Dawley-Carr with Juan Formell, who she worked with in Cuba until his death in 2014.